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## Media Coverage of Child Deaths in the UK: The Impact of Baby P: A Case for Influence?

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### 1. Summary

This briefing paper explores the extent to which recent UK media coverage has influenced policy on child death cases due to abuse and neglect, focusing on traditional print news coverage of the death of Peter Connelly, known as Baby P. It is informed by an exploration of newspaper reporting on the Baby P case.

The media has a number of roles which are significant when considering the reporting of child deaths. It is an important player in informing the public about news stories relating to social issues and has potentially an influential role in policy and services. However, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the media affects policymaking.

Although a very small proportion of the total population of children and young people die as a result of abuse and neglect, some cases are covered extensively in the media while others are reported more briefly or not at all. Coverage of the Baby P case follows a long tradition of particular child death cases attracting significant media interest. The Baby P case had a high level of coverage from the middle of November 2008 with the case becoming synonymous with child abuse, debates around child protection and public discontent on the role of the state in protecting children.

A search of the Lexus Library database found that there were 2823 mentions of the Baby P case in UK newspapers from 1 November 2008 until 1 November 2009. The tabloid newspaper, The Sun, had the highest number of articles which referred to the Baby P case with 848 articles while the broadsheet, The Guardian, had 228 references.

Three areas – events leading up to the death of Baby P, the role of professionals and previous involvement by the local authority in a high profile case – dominated media coverage in the immediate period following the conviction of the killers of Baby P. These different aspects resulted in a news story which had a number of different elements and a striking and complex narrative.

Newspaper reporting of the case has been defined by a photograph of Baby P which has become an iconic image. The use of images of children reflects the complex and often contradictory ways in which adults both portray and react to children. The depiction of Baby P has emphasised innocence while the coverage relating to the convicted adults has focused on their culpability. There has been an ensuing shift in responsibility by the media to the child protection professionals.

The wide usage of the internet and its different tools was a very significant component in the publicity attached to the case. In the case of Baby P, digital media offered different ways of presenting



information and comment about the case. Some newspapers used this to dramatic effect in engaging its readers. The social work profession presented a different view of social workers to the negative portrayals in the newspapers. The relevance of online media will continue to grow.

Social workers were viewed as being culpable in their failure to protect to Baby P in media coverage. The children's services professionals involved in the case were the focus of much media interest. The negative coverage of social workers is not unexpected in child death cases and is common in coverage of child deaths. Since the initial coverage of the case, surveys have found that there has been a negative impact on social workers and on the public's perception of social workers.

When the Baby P case became public, the UK Government immediately commissioned Lord Laming to report on progress in safeguarding children in England. How far the media reporting influenced the UK Government's announcements on the local and national reviews of child protection is difficult to ascertain. It can be assumed, however that the intensive coverage of the Baby P case encouraged government action in the period following the conviction of the Baby P killers in November 2008.

The death of Baby P took place in England but the case was covered in the regional and national media across the UK. In Scotland the death of Brandon Muir, ('Baby B'), also resulted in wide media coverage and political attention. There were elements which were common to media reporting in both the Baby P and Baby B cases but the different contexts makes direct comparisons difficult and inappropriate.

The death of Peter Connelly has become a landmark child death case, a reference point for child protection and for the perceived effectiveness of local authorities. The media coverage which began with such intensity has slowed since November 2009. But the complex interaction of different elements has ensured that the case has not disappeared from the newspapers. It still exerts a powerful influence.

It is too soon to ascertain if the case has had a long lasting impact on macro policy on child protection. This will be more difficult to analyse if the new UK Government makes fundamental changes to safeguarding and child protection policies in England. On the other hand, there are factors which have obviously been influenced by the case such as increases in child protection referrals.

The media coverage of Baby P has exposed the very public nature of safeguarding and child protection. It suggests that a more productive alliance is required between professionals, the media and public in the area of child protection in order to ensure that there is more measured debate in reporting on child deaths.

## 2. Introduction

This briefing paper explores the extent to which recent UK media coverage has influenced policy on child death cases due to abuse and neglect. It focuses specifically on traditional print coverage of the death of Peter Connelly, a seventeen month old child known as Baby P. The majority of coverage related to the case was in the nine month period from November 2008, when two of those charged with Baby P's death were convicted, up to August 2009 when the entitlement to anonymity of those convicted expired. However, there continues to be both direct and indirect media references to the Baby P case in 2010. The

case has become a reference point in the media for debates about different aspects of child protection, including the role of government and the effectiveness of recent policy initiatives. The Baby P case is also seen to have had an impact on public perceptions of the social work profession in the period since the case was first reported in the media (Local Government Association, 2009a and 2009b).

This briefing paper explores the scope of influence of the Baby P case, considering whether there is a relationship between the reporting of, and commentary on, child deaths and government policy responses. A greater understanding of the influence of the Baby P

case on child protection policy is likely to emerge over time. In the interim, this paper aims to provide some initial considerations of the relevance of recent media coverage in influencing policy on child death cases and child protection more generally, by referring to the Baby P case.

Child deaths are shocking and troubling. The societal expectation is that adults look after their own children and keep them safe from harm. A child's death at the hands of their parents, carers or extended family turns this set of responsibilities and expectations upside down and goes against commonly held assumptions about parenting. Public reaction to the death of children is one reason why the media covers such stories. But a child's death from abuse and neglect is a rare event which most people never encounter in their daily lives. Instead of having direct personal experience, the majority of people learn about child deaths through the media. Their knowledge and perspectives are informed by how child deaths are represented in these formats. The print, broadcast and internet media are therefore an important conduit for information on child deaths and the circumstances surrounding them. The media, in turn, is particularly interested in stories which involve children and relate to neglect and abuse (Ayre, 2001; Aldridge, 1999).

The media is also an essential vehicle for politicians and policymakers. It provides a means with which to communicate with the general public on political and policy issues. However, the media is not a neutral and unbiased means of sharing information. Newspapers, in particular, are known to have viewpoints which are aligned to particular positions, often politically orientated. These inform newspapers' 'take' on news stories and their reaction to policy announcements. Analysing the ways in which the media engages with politicians and the policy landscape requires an acknowledgement of these embedded perspectives. The relationship between the media, particular the print media, and policy making is not neutral.

The media has therefore a number of roles which are significant when considering the reporting of child deaths. It is an important player in informing the public about news stories relating to social issues and has potentially an influential role in policy and services. However, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the media affects policymaking, leading to a number of questions.

Does the media encourage policymakers to act when they would not have done so otherwise? Are public criticisms of national and local government in the media the impetus for policy change? Or, conversely, is the influence of the media much exaggerated? Is it more likely that the existing professional monitoring and scrutiny processes influence policy change, rather than critical commentary in national newspapers? These questions suggest that there is, at the very least, a tangential relationship between the media and policy development in the area of child protection.

### 3. Informing the briefing paper

This paper is informed by an exploration of newspaper reporting on the Baby P case. The volume of media coverage on the Baby P case and the size and scope of this analysis did not allow for an exhaustive study of media coverage. It was necessary to limit the search of newspaper coverage to significant points in the Baby P case and to particular newspapers. Newspaper coverage was accessed using the Lexus Library database which covers most newspapers in the UK. Coverage was accessed by using key search terms.

Newspaper coverage in November 2008 and early December 2008 was explored as this was the period immediately after Baby P's killers were convicted. News and feature items were considered in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. Particular attention was paid to UK papers such as The Sun, The Times, The Mirror and The Guardian which had a range of different kinds of coverage. In addition, coverage in newspapers which had other national perspectives such as The Herald (Scotland), The Western Mail (Wales) and The Belfast Telegraph (Northern Ireland). This was in order to identify if there were similarities or differences in media coverage across the four nations of the UK and the potential influence of media coverage in devolved administrations with different child protection procedures or perspectives.

There was also consideration of media at other key points during the eight months following the first major coverage in November 2008 (see Appendix One for table of key events) including the publication of Lord Laming's report in March 2009 (Laming, 2009) and the naming of those convicted of causing the death of Baby P in August 2009.

A more in depth study of newspaper coverage during the period November 2008 to late 2009 would provide further detailed analysis of newspaper coverage. Additional insights would also be provided by comparative analysis of the Baby P and other child death cases. In the absence of this in-depth analysis, this paper provides a starting point for exploring the interaction between policymaking on child protection and the role of the media.

## 4. Media coverage of the Baby P case

### 4.1 Media coverage of child deaths: a new phenomenon?

The intense coverage of cases such as Baby P gives an impression that child deaths due to neglect and abuse rarely happen and that the failures of those with a statutory responsibility to intervene are therefore more acute. The child death figures show that this is not the case. The NSPCC (2009) states that up to three children die per week from neglect and abuse in England, drawing on figures from Ofsted (2008)<sup>1</sup>. This figure includes cases where there has been domestic abuse previously between adults, evidence of substance misuse or where abuse or neglect was suspected (NSPCC, 2009). Although a very small proportion of the total population of children and young people, the figures show that children do regularly die as a result of abuse and neglect. It raises a question about what factors contribute to some cases being covered extensively in the media while others are reported more briefly or not at all. This is obviously relevant when considering the Baby P case which has had such wide coverage.

The extensive coverage of child death cases is not a new phenomenon. Media interest in the death of children through abuse and neglect began in the 1970s with the death of Maria Colwell. It has continued in the intervening decades with other high profile cases including that of Jasmine Beckford, Tyra Henry and Kimberley Carlile in the 1980s and suspected child abuse cases such as those in Cleveland, Rochdale and Orkney in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Aldridge, 1999). More recently, the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 became another landmark case and was the

impetus for significant policy change in England around child protection.

Coverage of the Baby P case follows a long tradition of particular child death cases attracting significant media interest. The Baby P case had an extraordinarily high level of coverage from the middle of November 2008 when details about the case became public. But this was not the only influential child death reported during this period. The Observer highlighted that at least 30 children were murdered due to abuse in the two years following the death of Baby P (Doward and Slater, 2009). Another high profile case, that of Brandon Muir (known as 'Baby B') in Scotland, was also covered extensively in the media. The case resulted in an independent review (Hawthorn and Wilson, 2009) and to professional debate and media analysis, mainly in the Scottish press. The coverage of the case of Baby P has been far wider, however, than the case of Brandon Muir and other cases of child death reported on during the two years since the death of Peter Connelly. This is shown by the level of press coverage. There were, for example, 336 mentions of the Brandon Muir case in comparison with 3317 mentions of the Baby P case in the period from November 2008 until April 2010 according to the Lexis Library database.

The Baby P case has become synonymous with child abuse and debates around child protection. At the same it has become shorthand for expressions of public discontent on the role of the state in protecting children.

### 4.2 Extensive coverage

The overwhelming media interest in details surrounding the death of Baby P case is exemplified by the number of UK newspaper articles which mentioned the case. A search of the Lexis Library database found that there were 2823 mentions of the Baby P case in UK newspapers from 1 November 2008 until 1 November 2009. The tabloid newspaper, The Sun, had the highest number of articles which referred to the Baby P case. It printed 848 articles which mentioned Baby P while the broadsheet, The Guardian, had 228 references. The case was reported across the four nations of the UK in some depth. The

<sup>1</sup> The NSPCC states that there is no single source which identifies the number of children who are killed in the UK



Belfast Telegraph made reference to the case 214 times, The Herald, published in Scotland, on 35 occasions and The Western Mail in Wales, 27 times. Drawing on figures relating to these specific newspapers, the English newspapers covered the case more extensively than the Welsh and Scottish newspapers while The Belfast Telegraph made reference to Baby P more frequently than in Wales and Scotland.

Although Peter Connelly died in 2007, the conviction of his mother's partner and his brother was the trigger for major media coverage in November 2008 (see Appendix One for timeline of key events). As details emerged about the case, the media focused on three specific elements in their reporting of the case. The first was the description of the events which took place over several months in the run up to Baby P's death in August 2007. The newspapers highlighted the child's injuries and his care arrangements during this time. The newspapers, both tabloid and broadsheet were graphic in their descriptions. The Daily Mail, for example, stated that 'Baby P's happy smile masked months of pain and terror inflicted by his mother and stepfather...The baby's cot and bedroom were stained with his blood. He weighed as little as a child five months younger and had been inflicting pain on himself by headbutting walls and floors' (Allen and Fernandez, 2008). This kind of coverage provoked a visceral reaction from many readers, reflected in letters and online comments.

The second area on which the media focused was the extent of professional engagement in Baby P's life prior to his death. The media drew attention to the 60 contacts between different services and Baby P and his family. Much of the print media, in this first phase of reporting, commented that this was evidence of professional and system failure. The Mirror reported that the doctor who saw Baby P before he died had 'little experience in child abuse' and the social worker 'failed' to spot abuse' (Shaw and Clements, 2008). The Independent stated that there were 'systemic deficiencies' (Independent, 12 November, 2008). The Sun was more abrupt in its condemnation. It stated that 'NO-ONE realised the danger he was in. And NO-ONE saved him' (The Sun, 12 November 2008). The focus of

this line of reporting, particularly in the tabloid press, was that the professionals had not carried out their duties effectively.

This focus on professional and systemic failure was compounded by the fact that Haringey, the local authority which had responsibility for protecting Baby P, had also been publicly criticised for the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000. This was a local authority which had already been subject to intense scrutiny. Following on from the death of Victoria Climbié, Lord Laming had made recommendations for child protection in England (Laming, 2003) which had led to Every Child Matters and to the Children Act (2004). The failures in the case of Baby P appeared to be particularly acute because the death happened in the same authority where Victoria Climbié had died and after significant investment policy and practice changes to safeguarding in England. It was given additional impetus by controversy surrounding the dismissal of the Director of Children's Services in Haringey, Sharon Shoosmith, which resulted in an employment tribunal and the subsequent finding that she was lawfully sacked in April 2010, nearly 18 months after the case was first given major coverage. The role of the local authority has continued to be, of central interest in newspaper reporting of the case.

These three areas – events leading up to the death of Baby P, the role of professionals and previous involvement by the local authority in a high profile case – dominated media coverage in the immediate period following the conviction of the killers of Baby P. The synergy between these different aspects added 'fuel' to the media reporting, resulting in a news story which had a number of different elements and a striking and complex narrative which drew widespread attention.

### 4.3 Baby P: an innocent victim

Newspaper reporting of the case has been defined by a particular photograph of Baby P which has been used regularly across the media and has become an iconic image. The use and impact of this photograph quickly became an important and constant component in media coverage of the Baby P

case.

Photographs of Baby P had been initially banned because of prosecutions against the step father but several newspapers won a legal battle to publish pictures. The Sun newspaper matched its 'first picture' of Baby P with an emotive description, a 'gorgeous, blond-haired, blue-eyed tot with a heart-melting smile' (Lazzeri and France, 2008). This picture of a small blonde boy was used consistently by all the media and particularly by the tabloids. A more disturbing picture of Baby P smeared apparently in chocolate and looking unkempt and gaunt was less frequently printed as was an early visual image, a representation of a child's head with marks showing Baby P's injuries. The image of Baby P appeared to become a symbolic way of signalling the failure of adults (parents and other significant adults as well as professionals) in the face of the helplessness of a young child.

The use of images of children in the press reflects the complex and often contradictory ways in which adults both portray and react to children. The media can veer, according to Franklin (2002), between the portrayal of children as victims or as evil. The Children's Rights Alliance England (CRAE) reviewed press coverage in England in 2008, focusing on the period from 1 October 2007 and 31 March 2008 (CRAE, 2009). CRAE identified 2642 articles about children in ten national English papers. The majority of these articles (57.6%) were in the tabloids with The Sun printing most stories (409) about children. Tabloid coverage was higher in stories about child death, child abduction or abandonment (there was no category for neglect or abuse). Articles about child death or accident were 17 or 9% of total sample. Over a third of articles included a photo of children with articles about child death or accidents more likely to have photographs (CRAE, 2009). The Baby P case followed many of the trends that CRAE identified; a traditional interest in stories about child deaths, significant tabloid coverage and wide usage of the image of Peter Connelly.

In contrast to the visual depiction of Baby P which emphasised innocence and vulnerability, the coverage relating to the three adults convicted in the case has focused on their culpability. The mother and the two men

have been frequently described as 'evil' (Garrett, 2009). Although some news coverage did consider the difficult circumstances in the life of the mother of Baby P (see Anthony, 2009), the media focused on Tracey Connelly's failure as a parent and the need for punishment. The Sunday Mirror, in an article headlined 'Let her feel fear just like Baby P' (Sunday Mirror, 16 August, 2009) stated that:

When a crime is as evil as the murder of a baby boy they [child murderers] lose any right to a normal life.  
(Sunday Mirror, 16 August 2009)

Fiona Millar (2007), in an article for British Journalism Review, highlights the spectrum of ways in which parents are depicted by the media. Simplistically they can be identified as belonging to two different camps:

on one side the feckless, welfare-scrounging begetters of feral yobs, teenage mums and vandals; on the other the hard-working, middle Englanders that so many politicians cite these days as their target audience and whose lives are presumed to be ruined by their less responsible peers'  
(Millar, 2007: 46)

If there is, as Millar suggests, broadly two ways in which parents are often presented in the media, the portrayal of mothers such as Tracey Connelly does not take into account the complexity of their personal circumstances. It allows for blame to be directed at professionals because these 'feckless' parents can be disregarded as being responsible. The shift of responsibility for a child's safety moves instead to child protection professionals.

#### 4.4 Digital engagement: a new media presence

Public reactions to the case were not restricted to reports in traditional newspaper formats. The wide usage of the internet and its different tools was a very significant component in the publicity attached to the case. Online media now provides a way in which individuals and interest groups can contribute to public debate on news stories in a dynamic way. This means that people can be active participants, creating their own content and making their views known without the established press

having a role as intermediaries. Blogs, forums and specialist sites have become media tools, providing comment and analysis from a wide range of perspectives. These are not only used by individuals. Newspapers also use online content to complement their hard copies.

In the case of Baby P, digital media offered different ways of presenting information and comment about the case. The Sun used this to dramatic effect in engaging its readers. It named the Director of Children's Services, two social workers, a doctor and health visitor and called for their sacking. Its online petition gathered 1,250,000 signatures in just over two weeks and was delivered to 10 Downing Street. This petition became a reference point for public disquiet about how professionals had responded to the needs of Baby P.

The presence of online media had other consequences. Bob Satchwell, the Executive Director of the Society of Editors, pointed out that there was more information available online on the Baby P case because newspapers were not in a position to report certain facts due to legal constrictions (Townsend, 2008). For example, the names of those convicted were not published in newspapers until August 2009, thereby protecting Baby P's siblings. However, these details were available on the internet long before the names were published. The monopoly of traditional newspapers in the production of text based news has been usurped by faster and less restricted online production of information. Those who provide content online such as the BBC had to legally comply with restrictions. By comparison, it was impossible to regulate the contributions of thousands of individual users.

The Sun petition produced a predominantly negative reaction from readers to the professionals, particularly social workers, involved in the Baby P case. However, independent online blogs and forums provided alternative viewpoints. The social work profession used online tools to present a different view of social workers to the negative portrayals in the newspapers. The Social Work blog, written by journalists from Community Care, analysed media coverage of the Baby P case (Maier, 2008). The Social Work Action

Network (SWAN) which identifies itself as a 'radical campaigning network within social work' published extensive pieces on the case written by academics and professionals. These included a call to 'Stop the witch hunt of social workers' and a condemnation of the media depiction of professionals (Hunt, 2008).

Discussion of print newspaper coverage of the Baby P case has to acknowledge the importance of this online engagement. The opportunity for user generated content providing news, comment and campaigning in public debates is becoming increasingly significant. At the very least, the high levels of online generated information promote public interest in social and political issues and events. At the other end of the spectrum, this activity can become highly influential, engaging people proactively in campaigning for change. What impact the amorphous online community has on policy making is not immediately obvious. But even at a simplistic level, the cross referencing between traditional media and online media is now part of the news landscape. The high level of debate generated by the Baby P case is an example of this new engagement.

Quantifying the influence of online media is outside the scope of this study but its relevance should be noted and taken into account. Its presence is an overt reminder of the relationship between different stakeholders in the area of child protection including professionals, politicians, the media, interest groups and the wider public. Its relevance will only grow.

## 5. Negative coverage of social workers: a wider impact

In media coverage, social workers were viewed as being culpable in their failure to protect to Baby P. Health professionals, including the consultant who had seen Baby P, were also identified as having failed in their child protection role. Garrett (2009) points out that those working in the public sector were targeted. However, the focus of media interest was unquestionably the social workers and children's services professionals involved in the case. This included managers and especially



the Director of Children's Services for Haringey, Sharon Shoemsmith who was sacked soon after the case was first covered in November 2008. There were other consequences. Following publication of details about the case in the media, Shoemsmith and her family were threatened as were other staff from Haringey. The sacking of Sharon Shoemsmith was mired in controversy about whether she had been unlawfully removed from her post and if the Minister Ed Balls had used his powers appropriately. It resulted in a judicial review case at the High Court with the judge finding against Sharon Shoemsmith in April 2010. This has meant that the professional ramifications from the Baby P case have continued to be reported in the media.

The negative coverage of social workers, exemplified by the campaigning of The Sun which called for the sacking of Haringey staff, is not unexpected in child death cases. Social work professionals and academics have commented previously on how social workers are portrayed (Ayre, 2001; Franklin and Parton, 1991). Ayre (2001) points out that one of the characteristics of coverage of child deaths in the media has been the criticisms of social work professionals. Galilee (2006), in a literature review on media representations of social work and social workers, found that the media was 'hostile' to social workers and that this has been a constant position since the 1970s. Franklin and Parton (1991) suggest that social workers have been seen as a 'metaphor' for the public sector, the assumption being that the public sector is regarded as suspect and prone to failure.

The professional magazine Community Care took up the issue of negative coverage of social work in its online forum. Its concern about the way the case was covered led Community Care to contact the Press Gazette after it was announced that the Baby P online campaign led by The Sun had been shortlisted for an award (Brody, 2009). Alan Baird, president of the Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) in Scotland pointed out in the Scottish broadsheet, The Herald, that 'vilification in sections of the press' of frontline staff impact across the UK, making it difficult for social workers in Scotland (Naysmith, 2008). Julia Slater, a former social worker, writing a

comment piece in the Guardian on 3 December 2009 suggested that social workers have never been liked. She stated that, unlike other professionals such as teachers or doctors, few people have had contact with social workers and that having a social worker is seen to be a sign that people are not coping. The atmosphere of 'criticism and blame from government, media or the general public' makes it difficult to people to choose social work as a profession (Slater, 2009). These comments reflect the defensive positioning of social work professionals in media coverage of Baby P and other cases.

Since the initial coverage of the case, surveys have found that there has been a negative impact on social workers and on public perceptions of social workers. A survey by Community Care of readers found that 40% of those who took part said that the Baby P case was impacting on their professional practice (Ahmed, 2009). The local union branch secretary in Haringey said that media coverage was resulting in verbal abuse of staff (Ahmed, 2009). A Local Government Association Poll (2009a) found that 42% of people's views of social workers had got worse since the Baby P case. The poll identified that 62% people thought that individuals (family, friends and neighbours), rather than the state, should have more responsibility protecting a child at home. The poll media release stated that council leaders were concerned that, the fallout from the Baby P case could:

lead to a decline in respect for child social workers, an increase in departures from the profession and a difficulty in attracting new candidates. The LGA fears that this could lead to wider gaps in the child protection safety net and a greater chance of a case of child abuse being missed.

(Local Government Association, 2009a)

The negative media coverage of social workers and other professionals appears to have had a widespread impact which is not necessary easily quantifiable. It appears to have influenced public perceptions of social work. Surveys of social workers suggest that it has affected staff morale. It may have become a factor influencing future career choices, making both the tasks and the public

profile of social work appear too challenging and exposed for those considering social work. The impact of media coverage on these different elements is likely to shift and change and may have diminished in influence since the initial coverage. However, these attitudes and responses have the potential to impact on child protection policies, even at the very basic level of ensuring that motivated and experienced professionals are available to undertake child protection work.

## 6. Influencing child protection policy

The previous section suggests that the media coverage of the case has impacted on the social work profession in influential ways. In an analysis of media coverage of child abuse scandals, usually child deaths, Ayre (2001) identifies that news items from the 1970s to the 1990s had three specific elements:

'the aggressive public pillorying in the mass media of those agencies deemed responsible; the publication of ever more detailed recommendations to welfare agencies resulting from public enquiries convened to look into the tragedies; the issuing of central government of increasingly intricately wrought practice guidance intended to prevent recurrence' (Ayre, 2001: 888).

The elements identified by Ayre have a resonance with the Baby P case. As already highlighted, 'aggressive public pillorying' of agencies (and their staff) has been a central element of news reporting. Ayre also suggests that serious and high profile cases result in intense, and often critical, scrutiny of child protection services. This scrutiny has, in turn, the potential to impact on policy making relating to child protection. This intense, scrutiny has been apparent in the Baby P case.

In the second week of November 2008 when the case made major headlines, politicians were quick to comment in the press. Ayre (2001) notes that politicians and policymakers are concerned about being blamed for child abuse cases in the media and that policy decisions take this into account. The rapid response of government is also emblematic of the importance that is attached politically to

child protection services. Of course, the death of a child is sufficient grounds to attract the attention of politicians. But there is also more at stake when national and local government have invested significant resources in protecting children. This resourcing is often underpinned by ambitious commitments to protect children. A Government media release from the lead Minister at the time, Ed Balls, highlights the interaction between policy and public attention:

The whole nation has been shocked and moved by the tragic and horrific death of Baby P. All of us find it impossible to comprehend how adults could commit such terrible acts of evil against this little boy. And the public is angry that nobody stepped in to prevent this tragedy from happening.  
(Directgov, 2008)

It appears that the impact of the Baby P case was almost instantaneous in some areas. Anthony Douglas, the Chief Executive of the Children and Family Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS), suggested that there was a Baby P effect in November 2008, even though this was only a short time after the case had come to public attention (Douglas, 2008). He suggested, in an article for The Guardian, that there had been an increase in reports of applications to court, in more 'cautious' decision making and that 'institutional risk aversion' was a reaction to the coverage of the case. This was backed up CAFCASS figures which showed that there were 'unprecedented' increases in s31 applications from November 2008 which peaked in June 2009 (Hall and Guy, 2009). This increase was not a momentary blip. This impact on the child protection systems continued beyond this initial period. The Telegraph reported findings from a survey of 100 local authorities which identified that there was a six per cent rise in the number of children in foster care or residential care in the six months between April and September 2009 compared with the same six months in the previous year (Jamieson, 2010). This pattern of an increase in referrals and cases is reflected in both media and professional reports.

In November 2008 when the Baby P case 'broke' in the media, Ed Balls, the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and

Families for the UK Government immediately commissioned Lord Laming to report on progress in safeguarding children in England. This was highly significant. The policies and processes that Lord Laming was tasked to review had been put in place in Every Child Matters programme, following Lord Laming's previous inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003). The five outcomes of Every Child Matters had been embedded in the Children Act (2004). To invite Lord Laming to review progress on his previous recommendations was a political acknowledgement of the link with past policy and practice scrutiny.

The report commissioned by Ed Balls, The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report (Laming, 2009) was published in March 2009. The Government accepted the report in full. Lord Laming reported that the Every Child Matters programme was providing a 'sound framework' for protecting children. He made recommendations to enhance existing practice and to ensure that good practice was in place locally across England. He called for more support for managers and front line workers. Lord Laming, emphasised the pressure that frontline staff were under stating that:

Public vilification of social workers has a negative impact on staff and has serious implications for the effectiveness, status and morale of the children's workforce as a whole. There has been a long-term appetite in the media to portray social workers in ways that are negative and undermining. (Laming, 2009: 44)

In all, 58 detailed recommendations were made in Laming's report. They covered leadership and accountability, support for children, interagency working, children's workforce, improvement and challenge, organisation and finance and legal issues. Key recommendations included new statutory targets for child protection, the establishment of a National Safeguarding Unit, specialisation in children's social work after the first year of the degree and Directors of children's services with no experience of child protection to have an social work manager with experience to support. As an outcome of Lord Laming's report, the Government set up a National Safeguarding Delivery Unit which was

established in 2009 and headed up by Sir Roger Singleton.

These recommendations were accepted by the Government in May 2009. Actions associated with many of them were deferred in order to be influenced by the Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance (Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) and the final report of the Social Work Task Force published in November 2009 (Social Work Task Force, 2009)

The NSPCC (2008), in its evidence to the Lord Laming's Review of Child Protection, stated that it could be deduced from media coverage that 'the UK's child protection system and the way that the UK treats children is in crisis' (2008:2). However, the NSPCC went onto say that:

The reaction to the death of Baby P feels different to us, in two respects, than in previous sad times. First, the depth of public outrage and in particular the view that after Victoria Climbié this should not have happened again: second, the reasons why this should happen again feel even more difficult explain or justify (NSPCC, 2008: 2).

The NSPCC's (2008) submission stated that it supported professionals in their complex roles, pointing out that it was parents and carers who killed children. It welcomed the 'visionary' aspiration of the Government but suggests that the term 'child protection' needs to be used to focus on the most vulnerable.

The influence of the Baby P case was not limited to England and its child protection policies. In Scotland, for example, the leader of the Scottish Labour party, Iain Gray, stated that child agencies should remove children more quickly when they were unsafe (Barnes, 2009). This was when the names of the Baby P killers were made public in August 2009 and was a direct link to the Baby P case.

The rapid political and policy reaction to the Baby P case in November and December 2008 suggests an attentive response to a high profile and serious child death case. How far the media reporting influenced the UK Government's announcements on the local and national reviews of child protection is

difficult to ascertain. However, high level policy announcements by Ministers are not generally an automatic response to the publication of details of child death cases. It can therefore be assumed that the intensive and, at times, coruscating coverage of the Baby P case encouraged Government action in the period following the conviction of the Baby P killers in November 2008.

## 7. Across the UK: Baby B in Scotland

The death of Baby P took place in England but the case has been covered in the regional and national media across the UK. As pointed out earlier, the case had more extensive coverage in England than in Scotland and Wales. But it still was seen to be relevant in other contexts. In Scotland, for example, the death of Brandon Muir, ('Baby B'), also resulted in wide media coverage and political attention.

This case had some similar elements to the Baby P case. Brandon Muir had been seen by health, social work, police and family support workers in the weeks running up to his death. The serious case review found that his death could not have been predicted but there was evidence of poor information sharing and recording (Wilson and Hawthorn, 2009). The review highlighted that there were consequences of the findings for child protection for the local authority and at national level in Scotland but at the same time emphasised the commitment of staff, a positive affirmation of social workers (Wilson and Hawthorn, 2009). This was paralleled by statements from the Government in Scotland which also did not criticise social workers or announce major policy change. This was a different approach to that of the Government in England to the Baby P case some months earlier.

The Baby B case was covered predominantly in the Scottish press although there was some reporting of the case elsewhere in the UK. The media coverage had similar critical headlines. Joyce McMillan, writing in *The Scotsman* in March 2009, explored the media coverage of the Brandon Muir case, highlighting the contradictory nature of this and other cases such as Baby P. She stated that a 'tidal wave of concern and compassion' contrasted with the way that debate soon deteriorates 'into

destructive moral panic on one hand, and ugly forms of scapegoating on the other' (McMillan, 2009). Dan Parton in an article for *Care Knowledge* on the Brandon Muir case suggests that media reporting had a different tone often to that of Baby P in England (Parton, 2009). Several newspapers, for example, explored the impact of drug use on families and child protection in some depth (Parton, 2009).

The circumstances surrounding the case of Brandon Muir were different to those of Peter Connelly. However, there were elements which were common to some (but not all) of the media reporting. Social workers were criticised and flaws in the existing systems were identified. In addition, the political, policy and practice context of the Brandon Muir case in Scotland was different to that surrounding the Baby P case in England. Making direct comparisons between the cases is difficult and inappropriate.

## 8. Concluding comments

The death of Peter Connelly has become a landmark child death case, sitting alongside other child deaths which have been reported in the media over the last four decades from Maria Colwell to Victoria Climbié.

The media coverage which began with such intensity in November 2008 has slowed since November 2009, a year after the first burst of coverage began. But the complex interaction of different elements has ensured that the case has not disappeared from the newspapers at the time of writing with intermittent news items still being reported such as the conclusion to the High Court proceedings relating to the former Director of Children's Services in April 2010. The case has also continued to be an ongoing reference point for child protection and for the perceived effectiveness of local authorities. The tenacity with which the case remains in the public eye suggests that it still exerts a powerful influence on the media and on their readers and audiences.

It is too soon to ascertain if the case has had a long lasting impact on macro policy on child protection. This will be more difficult to analyse if the new UK Government makes fundamental changes to safeguarding and child protection policies in England. It does appear that the influence of the case radiates out in ways that



are difficult to track in detail. On the other hand, there are factors which have obviously been influenced by the case. Consequent to the case being reported, for example, there have been increases in child protection referrals (CAFCASS, 2010). This is tangible evidence of the impact of awareness of the case on professional practice.

The media coverage of Baby P has exposed again the very public nature of safeguarding

and child protection, especially when a child dies under the care of the state. It suggests that a more productive alliance is required between professionals, the media and public in the area of child protection in order to ensure that there is more measured debate in reporting on child deaths. In turn, this could ensure that appropriate and thoughtful policymaking emerges from the sad, difficult and complex circumstances of child deaths.

## Appendix One

Date	Event
December 2006	Peter Connelly (Baby P) placed on child protection register
3 August 2007	Peter Connelly found dead
August 2007	Death of Peter Connelly reported
11 November 2008	Steven Barker, step father and his brother, Jason Owen convicted of causing or allowing Peter Connelly's death. Tracey Connelly, Peter's mother, previously pled guilty.
13 November 2008	New national child protection review announced by Minister Ed Ball. To be headed up by Lord Laming.
November 2008	The Sun newspaper petition signed by 850,000 people
November 2008	Original serious case review reported
1 December 2008	Council Leader of Haringey and cabinet member for children and young people resigned
November 2008	Director of Children's Services for Haringey, Sharon Shoesmith removed from post and replacement brought in.
December 2008	Government Minister Ed Balls under his powers under the Education Act 1996 directed Haringey Council to remove Sharon Shoesmith from post.
1 December 2008	Ofsted Joint Area Review of Haringey Children's Services published
	Government Minister Alan Johnson asked Healthcare Commission to review if NHS bodies applying national child protection standards
1 January 2009	Ed Balls appointed new Director of Children's Services in Haringey
	Second SCR to report- finally published in May 2009
March 2009	Sharon Shoesmith lodged claim for unfair dismissal and judicial review challenges against the role of Ofsted, Haringey Council and Balls in her dismissal
12 March 2009	Lord Laming delivered his review on child protection which called for an overhaul of social work training and management
12 March 2009	Ed Balls accepted all of Lord Laming's recommendations.
March 2009	Local Government Association Poll- 4 out of 10 had worse opinion of social workers following case
April 2009	4 other employees dismissed
May 2009	3 employees challenged dismissals
May 2009	Family court CAFCASS number of applications up one third on same period in 07-08
May 2009	Steven Barker convicted of raping 2 year old girl. Tracey Connelly cleared
May 2009	Steven Barker, Tracey Connelly and Jason Owen jailed.
May 2009	Government produced full response to Balls review
	Re-inspection of H six months after JAR
August 2009	Connelly and Barker named- original order banned naming to protect Peter Connelly's siblings.

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